

JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JOSEPH ZENTARSKI

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

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INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Zentarski

INTERVIEWER: Larry Richardson

RICHARDSON: This is an interview with Joseph Zentarski for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Program by Larry Richardson at 624 Clement Street on May 19, 1973.

RICHARDSON: Mr. Zentarski, I'd like to open this interview by asking you if you can tell me a little about your youth and background and how you came in the Joliet area.

ZENTARSKI: I was born in Joliet in '95, September 12, 1895.

RICHARDSON: Your parents lived here?

ZENTARSKI: Yes.

RICHARDSON: They were natives of Joliet?

ZENTARSKI: My mother was. My father was born in Poland.

RICHARDSON: They came here in what year?

ZENTARSKI: It must have been. . . see, off hand it goes back quite a ways. There were two brothers and my sister that came over at the same time. My mother's folks come from Germany. They first lived in Mokena. It was a farming town about ten miles east of Joliet, and then they moved to Joliet. Of course, Joliet was an old prairie at that time. Do you want to know my mother's maiden name?

RICHARDSON: This is all up to you; it's your interview. If





you'd give us a little background. Did your father spend a career in that? Was he a farmer?

ZENTARSKI: No, he was sort of a handyman. He worked for a chemical company. Of course, this was early in 1900. We're pretty young. Our early life--there was a separation in our early life. In our younger days we went to work when we were ten, eleven years old at that time. I worked on a milkwagon driving a horse and delivering milk after school and during weekends, and then when I got old enough I started working for the railroad. E. J. & E. That was in 1913. I put in forty-nine years and nine months out there before I retired. I'm retired now--going on thirteen years.

RICHARDSON: Did you get all your education in Joliet?

ZENTARSKI: Yes.

RICHARDSON: Where did you attend school? Can you tell any differences between schools then and now--what you've heard now?

ZENTARSKI: Well, it seems at that time in our early age they had two, three grades in each school. I didn't graduate from the eighth grade, but I put two years of night school at college and took up bookkeeping and accounting. There were very few kids in my age that really graduated at that time. Maybe one out of ten would finish school. High school was rare talk. Very few kids went to high school at that time, in my age, that was 1910. Somewheres around that.



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RICHARDSON: I see. This was a Joliet affiliated high school or education around here?

ZENTARSKI: Well, they used to call it. . . A Catholic school used to call it Commercial Price. Then you'd go to high school.

RICHARDSON: The school you attended when you were young, it was in Joliet?

ZENTARSKI: Yes.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember the name of the school?

ZENTARSKI: St. Johns and the Broadway School.

RICHARDSON: Down here?

ZENTARSKI: St. Johns on Hickory and Hutchins and the Broadway School. And I put a year in the Holy Cross School when I was a kid.

RICHARDSON: What was school financially? What were some of the costs to go to school?

ZENTARSKI: There was fifty cents a month tuition, I think. Of course, fifty cents then was a lot of money, too. The public schools were free at that time, but the Catholic schools, I think, were fifty cents a month. The third child went free; the first two paid. Then you had to buy your books, too. I try to remember different things. I was kind of going back a good many years. Somethings you remember



and some things you don't. Just like going to night school-- some things you can remember. I know I kept bookkeeping, but I never finished.

RICHARDSON: At Joliet Junior College?

ZENTARSKI: This was Metropolitan Business College at that time. There was a private concern that time. The teachers were then Mr. and Mrs. Flemming. One would mind one group and the other had the other group. As far as I know, they're both dead now. That was around 1913 or 1914.

RICHARDSON: What entertainment did you have when you were young around Joliet? What were the things to do?

ZENTARSKI: Well, we used to play Run Sheep Run. You'd have somebody else try to find you. And then we used to play games that they called Saw where you'd put a hole in the ground and each one would stand over the hole and you'd roll a ball over it and whatever hole it would roll into, that guy would get slapped, you know. (laughter) And then we used to have a whole lot of small birthday parties. We'd have little ice cream socials to celebrate each others birthdays, you know. We used to have a team of horses go around with an ice cream wagon. They'd sell penny cones. When you'd have this party this wagon would make a certain routine everyday. This ice cream wagon had two little ponies and they were brown and white colored ponies and the wagon was covered. They really had a good, attractive ice cream wagon.





This fellow used to roll us all cones. He had one of these hot irons and he'd roll his own cones--imagine in the wagon. A penny for a cone at that time. And if you got a penny in those days once or twice a week, you thought you were lucky. The only thing that was here then was a quarry, steel mill, and railroad. A lot of these old timers worked at the quarry. There was a chemical plant started up, too. When you came home from school you had to bring in coal, wood, and carry water. People didn't have any furnaces. I think the kids those days had more fun than they have today.

RICHARDSON: That could be very true.

ZENTARSKI: Because they were so busy doing what they had to do and today when the kids come home from school they practically have nothing to do. Jump on a bike or a car, if some of them are lucky enough to have a car. We used to play a lot of baseball--in an open field, play indoor under a light at night, or on corners. You couldn't do that today, too many automobiles. We used street light for light.

RICHARDSON: Mr. Zentarski, I'd like to know a little bit of the social conditions of those days as compared to now.

ZENTARSKI: The living conditions?

RICHARDSON: Basically, yes.

ZENTARSKI: Well, I know when I was on a wagon they were selling milk for three cents a pint and five cents a quart.





And that was the start of the horse and buggy. We had no bottles then. It was delivered in a pail with a spout on. If people wanted a pint or a quart of milk, you'd measure it out this spout. And they had pans. A lot of people didn't have any ice in those days. In the summertime you'd practically deliver twice a day so they'd have milk so it wouldn't get sour. When the bottle did come into the dairy business, a lot of people didn't want the bottles. They figured the bottles would be dirty. When they had to return the bottles they could put milk in the bottles and be dirty. It took quite a while before the people got used to milk bottles. In the wintertime they had a little stove on the wagon to keep the milk from freezing.

RICHARDSON: Were the people very uppety, say, about these milk bottles being dirty? I mean how did they finally realize that they were clean milk bottles and they accepted them?

ZENTARSKI: Well, they finally got used to them. Later on a lot of people started keeping the bottles, start putting jelly and stuff in them. The dairies used to pay, I guess, three or four cents a bottle at that time. We used to have jills, half-pints, pints, and quart bottles. They didn't have the gallon jugs that they got today.

RICHARDSON: Who did you work for when you worked on the milk wagon?



ZENTARSKI: Rittiger, George A. on Pine Street.

RICHARDSON: What where his employee's opinion of him? Was it high or low?

ZENTARSKI: Well, he had two wagons going, but at that time it was a small/dairy. There was one big dairy in town. That was the Weber Dairy Company at that time. There must have been about a dozen small dairies, then finally Flint Dairy came and they started buying out all the small dairies and the horses. In a dozen years or so there were only two big dairies left--Weber's and Flint's, and Flint's sold out to Meadow Corporation. That was in the early twenties.

RICHARDSON: Was your boss very well-liked by his employees?

ZENTARSKI: Well, he only had three employees. He was a working boss. He drove one wagon. The kids who worked for him in the dairy only had about three hundred customers about that time and with a horse and buggy or a horse and milk wagon. I don't know if you've ever seen one of these milk wagons. Of course, the wagon of today is a little bit different than it was in those days. When they got into automobile transportation they made the wagon a little bit different.

RICHARDSON: Could you give us an idea of how cleanliness and pasteurization and things differed in the dairy business, how the things went along?

ZENTARSKI: Well, they started pasteurizing about 1910. I





think somewheres around there. Of course, today it's all homogenized. Years ago when they pasteurized they did it to a certain point to kill, I forget what they call them at that time. But every year there was more and more stuff that came out in regard to sanitary conditions, you know, in regards to handling milk. Pretty particular later on. The farmer had to keep his barn clean and the dairy had to do a certain amount to keep the building and the place of business clean. The more cleaning they had to do, that's the reason the price of everything had to go up, too, more expensive.

RICHARDSON: Was it basically the people that wanted better conditions or was it the government clamping down?

ZENTARSKI: It was the state.

RICHARDSON: The state was clamping down?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, and the city health office. . .

RICHARDSON: They passed certain acts?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, and they used to go around and take samples of your milk, too. At that time they'd water your milk, you know, so it would be. . . Milk had to test four per cent at that time. They'd allow you so many per cent, that was three per cent. They'd figure you watered it or took too much cream off.

RICHARDSON: Is that much different from today? Is the milk percentage. . .





ZENTARSKI: Well, today there's so many different grades of milk that I really don't know much about history of milk today.

RICHARDSON: There was just Grade A then back in those days?

ZENTARSKI: Just skimmed milk and regular milk at that time. When they started putting milk in bottles the cream would come to the top. Then when they started homogenizing milk, well, they broke the cream and milk up so you didn't have to let the bottle stand all day to come and get the cream on top due to being homogenized, you know. Later on when they started homogenizing the people were wondering where the cream was. The way they homogenize you don't get any cream. It's all broken in with the milk.

RICHARDSON: After you worked on the wagon you were then employed with E. J. & E. Railroad?

ZENTARSKI: Yes.

RICHARDSON: For forty-nine years. Can you tell us anything of the big changes in the railroad when you first started out there?

ZENTARSKI: Yes. When I first started there this was a hundred per cent steam railroad at that time. E. J. & E. Railroad is backed by the United States Steam Corporation. They run the Chicago Outer Belt Line. It runs from Gary to Waukegan. It services all the steel mills. For a short railroad it was



the biggest railroad in the world according to what they say, you see. For a short while they handled more freight for a short line than any other railroad in the country. Then around 1935 they started dieselizing. The first diesels they got at that time were during the Depression in '34. In '35 they brought them into east Joliet for an overhaul. See, they used them over in the Gary mills there. When the diesels first came into existence everybody said they. . . some of the old rotar engineers said that it'd never pull a boxcar. But after four or five years they started getting more and more diesels. Within twenty years the railroad was completely dieselized. They had about 325 steam engines at that time. They had about 90-95 road engines. The rest were steam engines. When they had these blast furnaces they used to have ten, twelve steam engines servicing these blast furnaces bringing supplies from the furnace back and forth. Then they'd transfer all to the steel mill to the J. yards. Then they'd take them over to Gary or Waukegan, whatever quantity of steel you want. The more business was at that time, the bigger E. J. & E. was. Then one time they built their own cars, steam cars--gondolas. They had around 7900 employees at one time, this railroad. It was after they dieselized that they didn't need as much help. Because with a diesel all you do is snap a button and she starts, where with steam engines every ten days you'd have to wash the boilers out to get the alkaline out of the water. That would be practically one day's loss for that one steam engine. Diesels come in off



the road and they're put in the roundhouse, and all they do is oil it up, fuel it up, do a little minor check and repair and you're ready to go again. Where you take a steam engine: it may be three, four hours to get it ready, and once after the boiler is washed then you'd have to fill it up with water, refire it. It would take a couple hours before it would build up a steam up to 120-150 pounds before they could take it out on the road again. And every twenty miles they had a coal chute. . . they'd fill them up with coal. Now you take these long runs, like for instance, the Sante Fe between Joliet and California or Chicago and California. They used to have roundhouses every 150 miles that you'd change engines. Now a fellow was telling me, these diesels that start at Barstow, they later complete the run down to San Francisco and come all the way back to Chicago, and those five diesels will make that complete run. That's five thousand miles. And going through the desert, the same way. You can still see some of the landmarks where the roundhouse used to be. A lot of these section men used to live around the roundhouses, you know. That's a thing of the past.

RICHARDSON: Did they have any problems or crises, you might say, with transporting the feed that they have lately? They haven't had enough cars for the railroad.

ZENTARSKI: Well, there's always a scarcity of cars. It seems like there's always a scarcity of cars, but now there seems to be more talk on shortage of cars. Since they





started selling grain to Russia they're hollering more about the shortage of cars than they did before. It was a common thing, though, for a railroad's businessman. . . Well, at that time a couple of my former friends that lived along the C. B. & Q. there--when the cattle were ready to go to market they'd be waiting for stock cars to load up the cars and they couldn't get them. They'd be running out of feed and finally the farmers would start buying trucks because when cattle are ready for the market and you're running out of feed you're going to get that cattle to the slaughter house quick as you can because when you're buying feed off somebody else you're not making much profit on your cattle. So that's how the farmers got their own cattle trucks. There were very few cattle shipped by stock cars today. You don't see many cattle shipped by stock car today. Then they opened up that stockyard down south of here; you probably know where that is. And when you come up that road at night you can see stock trucks coming from all directions. That's a busy place now.

RICHARDSON: So the farmers never really relied on the railroad for transportation of their products?

ZENTARSKI: They used to at that time until the railroads found some cars . . . of course, stock cars might have been exciting there and there. It would take them maybe two or three days to get them off of different roads.

RICHARDSON: Do you know if the farmers ever ganged up and





revolted on the railroad for revoke of promises?

ZENTARSKI: Well, there was talk of it, but I never really knew of anything that took place at that time.

RICHARDSON: Did farmers seem to be as independent as they are now?

ZENTARSKI: Well, they seemed they couldn't get the farmers to organize. There'd only be a certain group that would be willing to and the other group, well I guess, they couldn't afford it. A lot of these fellows were paying on their farms. They had to meet the payments and, of course, if there wasn't any money coming in, they couldn't hold out for very long. Now, I guess, they're better organized than they were at one time. In the National Observer there they were getting \$7.00 a bushel for soybeans. That's a lot of money.

RICHARDSON: Back at the railroad here you had, I imagine, a number of bosses all the years you worked there--the different men you worked under.

ZENTARSKI: Supervisor?

RICHARDSON: Yes. Can you tell us which one you liked best and why?

ZENTARSKI: Well, the last one that I worked under seemed to be most liked by everyone. A fellow by the name of Rentchler--he was the best in our time. He was the best supervisor of both parts. The old ones in 1913, or was it '14 when the



First World War started. . . The railroads weren't organized then. Roosevelt appointed Mackado Director of Railroads, and he just as much told the boys to go out and get organized so they could get more money. Railroad shop craftsmen started getting more money then in 1914 after they were recognized as a union; that was in 1914. Mackado was General Director of Railroads under Theodore Roosevelt. Then around 1936 they started looking for railroad retirement pension. The first time the judges threw it off as unconstitutional or something, then they brought it up again and they finally passed it in 1937. Railroad retirement pension is independent from social security pension. Railroad men at that time were paying two and three quarter per cent out of their wages and upped it \$200 at that time. Then the company was kicking in as much. Then every couple of years they increased the percentage on your income. Now I think its around. . . you take out the \$700 now you pay, I guess. It amounts to about \$45 dollars a month that you pay out of your wages. The railroad pays in as much. Fellows getting a pension today will get twice as much as we got when we retired. They're paying three times as much as we did. When I retired in '60 they were taking six and a quarter percent or six percent out of 350. Anything over 350 wasn't taxable. They got several raises since then. I think the limit is \$700 that they take out for railroad retirement now. The most vacation we got at that time was three weeks. NOW they get five weeks vacation and seven paid holidays. We only got five paid holidays when we got ready to retire.





RICHARDSON: Did you go through a number of railroad contracts in the union as you worked there?

ZENTARSKI: Their contracts run three years at a time before they renew a contract. Is that what you mean?

RICHARDSON: Yes.

ZENTARSKI: They'd try to improve on working conditions and wages.

RICHARDSON: That's always the main criteria, just wages and working conditions.

ZENTARSKI: Then later on they'd put in a clause there on cost of living. If the cost of living went up, there'd be an automatic raise, too. They got that in the contract today, too. For thirty-five years I was what they called a locomotive painter. I did all their lettering. First it was done in gold leaf, then in aluminum leaf; then it was done in aluminum. I did that for thirty-five years. After they got the diesels, then they started getting decal work. Most of the work was done with decals at that time. They'd get a roll of reflective tape and used to put stripes on the cells so they could . . . When the light would hit it it would reflect if there was a diesel coming one way or another. The back end was striped, too, with reflective tape. Just like the state signs on the highway, you know. They used to put four-inch stripes on the back. You'd get a roll and have to cut it out and put it on. The numbers were the same way.





You'd cut out the numbers and put them on.

RICHARDSON: Progressively, the numbers and the letters then got better?

ZENTARSKI: Yes. Some of the smaller ones you'd cut out yourself like stencil cutting. I used to do a lot of that, too. They had about 150 boiler makers and a hundred and some machines. In the early days the steam engines had oil lamps. Everyone knew there was an engine coming. Right after the early part of World War I they got these steam generators to make their own electricity on the steam engines, to generate their own power. Then they got better headlights. They put lights in the cab, a light in the back end. The front part of the engine would have a big spotlight that would throw quite a ways.

RICHARDSON: Did the railroad and World War I become directly affiliated with each other? Did they depend on the railroad for transportation of certain materials?

ZENTARSKI: The railroads were taken over by the government in World War I. Everybody was shipping freight over all different roads, whichever was the shortest route, where before the steam corporation followed their own route at that time. But during the war they'd bring cars on Sante Fe, whichever the shortest route in order to move war material at that time.

RICHARDSON: The government depended greatly on the railroads?



ZENTARSKI: No, according to different ones the railroads bought so much equipment and charged Uncle Sam for so much money that the government said it never would take the railroads over again. The railroads were buying everything that came along and they were getting eight per cent from the government.

RICHARDSON: How about your conditions down there during the Depression? Did they vary at all or did it stay pretty much constant in the railroad business?

ZENTARSKI: Well, they partly laid the men off down to about ten per cent. Some places were really down flat then. There were fellows that were laid off for five years before they called them back. They started getting ready for the Second World War. They started building around here someplace around Elwood or Kankakee. Around 1939 they first started hiring men back to the railroad at that time. They started laying them off in 1931 and every two or three months they'd cut the gang down fifty per cent. They were laying them off until around the early part of 1939. About when the Second World War started they started calling men back again. At that time they didn't have any social security, no compensation or anything then. Where today when they get laid off you get rocking chair money and a lot of guys taking their pension. I see now where you can take your pension after thirty years and get the full pension. Before if you took your pension on disability or something like that, you lost fifteen per cent.



According to what I read now, after thirty years you get your full pension. Thirty years seems like a long time to work for a place; and I put in 49 years and nine months. I've seen a lot of changes made out there.

RICHARDSON: Could you describe any of those to us?

ZENTARSKI: Well, like communications. They built a lopper yard since then. Most of your incoming freight, they check it with TV now. They take the trains and they classify them over in retarded yards. All that was done by electronic control. They switch these cars on classified tracks. They got a group going to this road, a group going to that road. They'd just classify them and put them in different tracks on the road.

RICHARDSON: How did they used to check cars coming in?

ZENTARSKI: They had a yard clerk.

RICHARDSON: Just one guy standing there to check all the cars?

ZENTARSKI: Well, the yard clerk came in on three shifts. And then they had what they called the agent's office. The yard clerks would have these cars all checked and they'd tell you just how they wanted them. They'd check these cars and they'd know just what cars came in and were these cars were, what they had, and where they were going. Within so many hours they'd know where every car was on the road. Now







they tell me they've got some kind of apparatus on there-- numbers, I mean colors, and as they go through they got them in a certain spot and this TV takes this reading off of that. The IBM checks that car and sends it so they know just what's coming through the yard at that time. I read about it, but I just can't explain it to you. You've probably heard about that, too.

RICHARDSON: You spoke of some communication changes down at the yard.

ZENTARSKI: They have walkie-talkies. I've just seen on the mile post they're trying some new kind of electronic equipment that they can talk while they're moving their cars and stuff. They've come a long ways. Of course, some of these guys that are in on this transportation, that are right in it there, they'd know more than I would. Most of my experience was in the shop. I've seen the way the shops are run. I remember when the first welding machine came in. They could weld steel together with a rod. Acetyline torches came in that burned these different plates. That was quite a sight to see. Electric welding has come a long ways today. All of that today is automatic. You've probably seen a lot of welding done there at school.

RICHARDSON: You'd say that that's probably been the biggest novel feature over the years you worked there, was the welding torch?



ZENTARSKI: That was really quite an invention as far as handling steel for traction and belting tires. If stuff just didn't fit right then just get the acetyline torch and burn it and make it fit. Before they'd have to either take it down and chisel it by hand or get an air hammer and chisel it. That really was something. That was really quite an invention.

RICHARDSON: You never did go into any bookkeeping phases after college? You just thought that would be a nice field and you took a couple courses to see what it was like?

ZENTARSKI: I was going to night school while I was working at the J. I just quit; I don't know why. I just got tired of going. There were four of us that started. The one friend of mine completed his bookkeeping course. I went around to a little club there and this agent from the Metropolitan, he's the one that talked us into going to college. The purpose of tht was at that time. . . A lot of the kids didn't complete their school, their education, and started these night classes to give the kids a break at that time. Of course, they've got these different schools today now, too. They've got these summer schools for kids to catch up.

RICHARDSON: Who was the first president you remember?

ZENTARSKI: I remember Cox or Woodrow Wilson. He was the war president.

RICHARDSON: You mentioned Roosevelt. Did he use the big guys



with the railroads?

ZENTARSKI: Roosevelt, when he got in he was in for sixteen years at that time, I think.

RICHARDSON: That's FDR, right?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, Franklin. I remember Roosevelt. He was in during the Second World War. Wilson was going to keep us out of war, but we got in the war--that was 1914, I think it was. I think Wilson died, and I think that was the way it way. Roosevelt ran for president. He appointed Mackado to be Railroad Director for all the railroads when the government went to war during the First World War.

RICHARDSON: So as far as your career, Roosevelt had the big thing to do with the railroads? He was really the only interferer?

ZENTARSKI: He was the main guy when it comes to running the railroads at that time. Of course, Mackado ran the railroads, but Roosevelt was the president.

RICHARDSON: Do you have any favorite presidents?

ZENTARSKI: Well, my favorite president was "Give 'Em Hell Harry" Truman. I think he was the squarest president we had. If he had anything to say, he could back up his statements. I liked his ways of running the government at that time. He didn't care whose feet he stepped on. If he had something coming, he'd give it to him. They nicknamed him "Give 'Em







Hell Harry". Everybody heard that. Different ones say he was well liked. He was liked more by more people. Of course, the politicians, they'd give him a bad time. The politicians gave every president a bad time.

RICHARDSON: I guess back then there were a lot of railroad scandals too weren't there?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, that's the reason why when the Second World War came the government said they didn't want anything to do with the railroads any more. He learned his lesson taking the railroads the first time.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember anything about the scandals? Did they affect you later at all?

ZENTARSKI: Well, there were a lot of different things that came up that I just can't recall at the present time. Just like we're going through this war again. . . a scandal now. You hear so much you don't know who to believe or how it's going to come out.

RICHARDSON: There was no real big scandal in the Joliet area, the Chicago area?

ZENTARSKI: Offhand I just can't think of anything. Sometimes you hear one or two wars and a lot of things come back to your mind, you know.

RICHARDSON: They used to speak of the big railroad bosses like J. P. Morgan and Rockefeller and those guys. They never



really entered in the Midwest, though, did they?

ZENTARSKI: Like these big fellows were more on the stock market scandal. But Judge Gary, he's the guy who ran the steam corporations, as far as I know I never heard anything about Judge Gary. He was the head of the United States Steel. As far as I know, his record was clean up until he retired. Before then they had what they called the Carnegie pension. A lot of retired steel workers or even railroad men come in underneath the Carnegie pension today. Anybody that works for a steam corporation or railroad comes underneath the pension today, too. But off hand I can't think of any railroad scandal. I bet there's a lot of conniving done. There was one report there about how different roads were selling cars from one class of railroad to another road and getting the government to pay freight service on these different cars that would be shipped from one yard to another. Do you know what I mean?

RICHARDSON: I follow you a little.

ZENTARSKI: Well, they'd ship them to this road, and this road would put it in the bill and they'd ship it to the other road and just do them back and forth. There was a lot of that going on. There must have been something to it, otherwise, they wouldn't have talked about it.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember anything like how industry developed with the railroad--like the welding torch? Any



other machineries that come into being that really helped your field of machine shop down there?

ZENTARSKI: A lot of different factories called up the E. J. & E. The J. got a lot of different factories to locate on their right of way. A lot of these factories located just because the E. J. & E. had branch lines running in different parts. They used to haul down to the coal fields since the coal fields were bannered. They got different factories down there. There's three, four big manufacturers down there that would look to it. Then they earned the E. J. & E. right of way and hauled raw materials back and forth and then up along the Plainfield area. They got a couple of whiskey distillers there that located due to E. J. & E. Several big factories located along the E. J. & E. right of way. Just like the Sante Fe, they got to Johnson and Johnson. They had a square line running up there off the Sante Fe. The Sante Fe is bringing in a lot of industries around this neck of the woods, too.

RICHARDSON: Is this your first house in Joliet? Is this where you first moved?

ZENTARSKI: This is the third place that I moved.

RICHARDSON: Where else did you live?

ZENTARSKI: My early days were on the six hundred block of Summit Street. Then we moved into the one hundred block of Summit Street. Then we moved into the five hundred block of







Center Street. Then we moved up here in '24. I built about twenty per cent of this place myself around 1924.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember anything about your first house-- how it differed from this one? The size, how it was built, what it looked like?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, the first house, all we had in it was a kitchen sink and a soft rainwater pump. That was the only improvement there was at that time. It wasn't until after 1912 that we got the first drop cord light. No, first we got the open jet gas; that was in 1910. In 1911 or 1912 we got these drop cord electric lights. Then later on they started putting candle pipes in. Of course, after we moved up here in 1924 electricity was pretty well established then. The kitchen sink and the rainwater pump were the only conveniences you had in the house at that time.

RICHARDSON: You used a fireplace for heating food?

ZENTARSKI: A soft coal heater and a kitchen stove.

RICHARDSON: You've seen most of Joliet grown then?

ZENTARSKI: Oh, yes!

RICHARDSON: Do you remember the population in Joliet in about the turn of the century?

ZENTARSKI: It was 20,000 or something like that.

RICHARDSON: Was it all located down around the river down there?



ZENTARSKI: Well, Bluff Street was the main downtown area at that time. Between Western Avenue and Jefferson Street was the main part of Joliet.

RICHARDSON: Was it all still built backed up in the cliff like that?

ZENTARSKI: Thre reason why that was the main part was because most of the stuff was brought up by tow boat. They'd tow these boats down by horses. That's how they got the supplies back and forth. My wife's folks pioneered the Will County.

RICHARDSON: What did they pay?

ZENTARSKI: A quarter an acre. (laughter)

RICHARDSON: It's amazing to think about it.

ZENTARSKI: First they sold ten acres to a fellow; I can't think of his name now. Well, anyhow, in 1921 there was a little boom on. The real estate men were buying property and there were different factories located and they started bidding on that land out there. First they started out with \$1,000 an acre and by the time they got ready to sell they got \$1,400 an acre for it. That was in 1921. And they paid a quarter an acre! The wife's grandfather died in 1911. He was 91 years old when he died. His second eldest son, he was an old bachelor. He used to come over and play pinochle a lot of times before he died. When you'd see kids getting nickels and dimes every day he says, "You know, I was eighteen years



old before I seen the first dime." And he says, "The folks used to worry how they could pay their real estate tax." Everything was done in barter or trade then--there was no money. They were paying \$3.25 taxes and they'd be worrying day and night how'd they'd get that \$3.25 to pay those taxes. Now kids today make that much money having a coffee break. Some land around here at that time was swamp land, but that's hard to believe. The land where the shopping center is, K Mart, they paid \$55 an acre. Will that tell some of these people what they paid for land at that time? They don't believe you. I know, the way they look at you they don't believe you.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember seeing your first automobile?

ZENTARSKI: Yes, it was a Page. I believe my mother-in-law's brother had one. They were saloon keepers. They ran a butcher shop and a saloon. The first automobile, I think they called it the Brush--chain driven, two seater. Then later on they came out with the economy buggies. They looked like a surrey without a top, a seat in the front and the back. They had hard rubber surrey tires on them at that time. They used to build them right here in Joliet on the east side near the Rock Island tracks.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember prohibition in the Joliet region?

ZENTARSKI: Oh, yes. Prohibition is one of the biggest mistakes that was ever made. That's when the people got disrespect for the law. Eighty per cent of the people started







drinking then. You take anything away from a people, that's when they want it. I still say that's one of the biggest mistakes they ever made. If you're going to tell the people not to do anything, that's when they're going to do it.

RICHARDSON: Were there a lot of big racketeers in that era?

ZENTARSKI: Oh! That's when Capone got started, and they had a couple of wild cat breweries here. I was making homemade beer myself here. I like that there better than what they sell today. I used to make about like two cases of beer a week, and we would have it in a five-gallon crock in the basement and had one of these caverns.

RICHARDSON: Do you remember any of the names around Joliet that were affiliated with rackets and that?

ZENTARSKI: The Citizen Brewery, the government closed them up.

RICHARDSON: Where were they located?

ZENTARSKI: They were operating on Collins Street. They had a wild cat brewery, and there was a wild cat brewery on Summit Street. There's another one starting down there right wouth of where the Union Bank is on Joliet Street called the E. Porter Brewery. They were getting raided when they started. Somehow or another either the government stopped them or they ran out of money or something. Then Sehring Brewery, that was the most modern brewery at that time in Joliet.



They closed up during prohibition. Then when they repealed the prohibition act the government told these breweries to get ready to open up again because everybody was in favor of repealing the prohibition act. The pressure was on because my brother-in-law was a brewery worker and a couple of other guys that were brewery workers, they worked at that plant for over a year getting the vats ready, getting the kegs ready. Then the day after the prohibition law was repealed they had beer to go on the market and at that time you didn't need any license. Everybody and their uncle was selling beer until they passed a law where they had to have a license to sell beer. They had two or three places right in the neighborhood that were selling beer. You could buy beer in any counter now. People were selling ice cream and beer at the same time. Nobody had to have a license then. It was a nickel a beer. They had vats there. They were racking off about 200 barrels of beer a day. Everybody was drinking. . . They were beer crazy there for a while. I was up there at what they called Hyler's root beer stand; they had beer there. I was up there one day for a hamburger and some guy drove in and he saw beer for sale. I bet he drank five, six big glasses with his hamburger sandwich. Along what they called Meeker Avenue everybody had stills going.



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